



## *Upanishad*

*Upa-* (near), *ni-* (down), *sad* (to sit):  
sitting near the teacher

Six Primary Concepts of  
the *Upanishads*

I.  
BRAHMAN

The *Upanishads* emphasize the **impermanence** of the empirical world, physical reality as we experience it through our senses.

Maya

Beyond Maya, there is an  
unchanging reality called

**Brahman**

(lit. “to expand”)

# Four Claims about Brahman

- Brahman is the fundamental principle of the universe. (*Kena Upanishad* IV and V)
- Brahman is the reality in all, and all things are in Brahman. (*Svetasvatara Upanishad*, IV. 2–4)
- Brahman is the state of non-duality. (*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, IV.v.14–15)
- Brahman is Ineffable. (*Kena Upanishad*, I. 5-9)

# Brahman as the Impersonal Absolute

The central claims of *the Upanishads* about Brahman suggest that Brahman is not a *personal* being, not a being with attributes that characterize “persons” (e.g., self-awareness, perspectival experience, deliberative rationality, and being the subject of intentional states).

On this view, Brahman is *formless* or *attributeless* (*nirguna*) and not a personal God.

If Brahman is without form, then “gods” represent different provisional manifestations of Brahman.



Brahma



Vishnu



Shiva

The *Trimurti* (three forms) represent Brahman manifested in the processes of creation, preservation, and dissolution and recreation of the cosmos.

# Brahman as Personal God

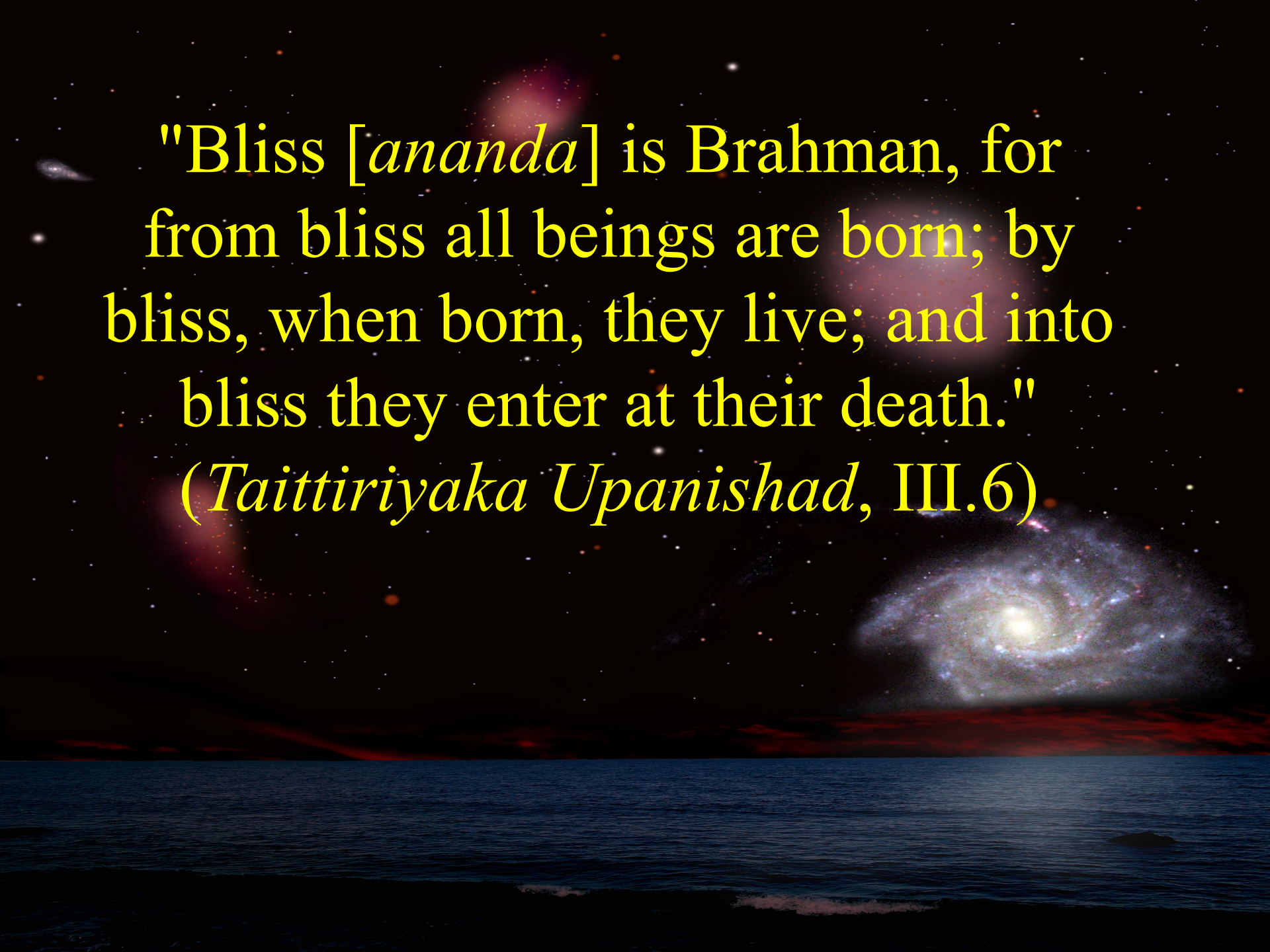
- *The Upanishads* also refer to Brahman under various attributes (*saguna Brahman*), including those indicative of personhood: knowledge, will, and moral goodness (*Svetasvatara Upanishad*, VI.1-23).
- Some passages in *Mundaka Upanishad* subordinate imperishable Brahman to the supreme “Purusha” (person).
- Other later *Upanishads* emphasize personal theism (e.g. *Katha*, *Isa*, and *Svetasvatara*).

# Brahman as Creator?

The *Upanishads* speak of Brahman as *creator*. However, even where Brahman is conceived of in personal terms, “creation” refers to a necessary emanation of the universe from the being of Brahman, like the flowing of a web from a spider.

The *Upanishads* affirm eternal, cyclical processes of the origination of order, its evolution, and eventual dissolution.

"Bliss [*ananda*] is Brahman, for  
from bliss all beings are born; by  
bliss, when born, they live; and into  
bliss they enter at their death."  
(*Taittiriya Upanishad*, III.6)



II.  
ATMAN

# The True Self (Atman)

The *Upanishads* teach the existence of a true Self called *Atman*.

Atman is distinguished from the individual personality or ego formed through attachments to sense objects.

The true Self of each person is not identical with the body or a person's mind as conditioned by sense experience.

# Atman is Pure Consciousness

- Atman is simply consciousness or awareness without objects. Hence atman is called “pure awareness” or “non-differentiated consciousness.”
- Atman is distinct from the mind, for the mind is *consciousness conditioned by objects* and hence duality (subject-object relation).
- The “separate ego” or “false self” is an identification of the “I” with sensing, perceiving, and thinking, or the objects given through these changing mental processes. “I am this” “I am that.”

# Atman is Pure Consciousness

- Atman is the enduring and ever-present “I” behind changing “states” of consciousness, the witnessing background of all experience.
- Unlike the body and the mind, Atman is eternal, unborn, and unlimited.
- Many *Upanishads* deny that Atman is an individual consciousness. It is non-dual consciousness or universal consciousness, from which it follows that the Atman of each person is the same reality.

“The wise one is not born, nor dies.

This one has not come from anywhere, has not become anyone.

Unborn, constant, eternal, primeval, this one

Is not slain when the body is slain. . . .

He who is the bodiless among bodies,

Stable among the unstable.

The great, all pervading Self –

On recognizing Him, the wise man sorrows not.”

*Kena Upanishad II.18,22*

“That Self (Atman) is not this, it is not that (neti, neti). It is unseizable, for it cannot be seized; indestructible, for it cannot be destroyed; unattached, for it does not attach itself; is unbound, does not tremble, is not injured.”

*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, iv.v.15*

# Relation between Brahman and Atman

*Tat Tvam Asi*

“Thou [Atman] art That [Brahman]”

*(Chandogya Upanishad, VI)*

A famous and controversial passage from  
*the Upanishads.*

Atman and Brahman are identical?

Atman and Brahman are united in some  
way without being entirely identical?

# III. AVIDYA

The human  
perspective is  
characterized by  
ignorance (*avidya*)  
of the true nature of  
reality and the self.



Human persons identify themselves with their body or with their individual states of consciousness formed through contact with and attachment to sense objects.

This is the *false ego* or *false self*.

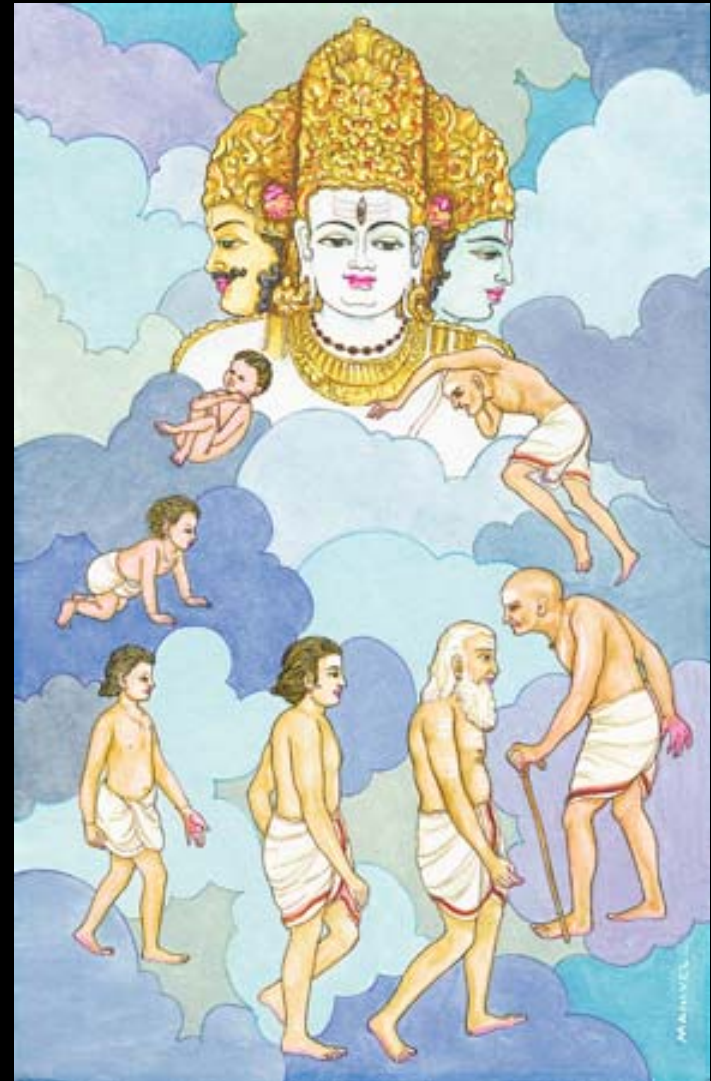




The false ego is the source of human suffering or unhappiness because the false ego is a product of attachments to what is non-enduring.

IV.  
SAMSARA  
and  
KARMA

*The Upanishads*  
teach that all life  
forms move  
through repeated  
cycles of birth,  
death, and rebirth,  
until final  
liberation from this  
cycle.



The cycle of death and rebirth is called  
**Samsara.**

Its fuel or energy is called  
**Karma.**

The termination of the cycle is called  
**Moksha.**

“Where one’s mind is attached – the inner self  
Goes thereto with action, being attached to it alone.

Obtaining the end of his action,  
Whatever he does in this world,  
He comes again from that world  
To this world of action.

- So the man who desires.”

*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, iv.iv.6*

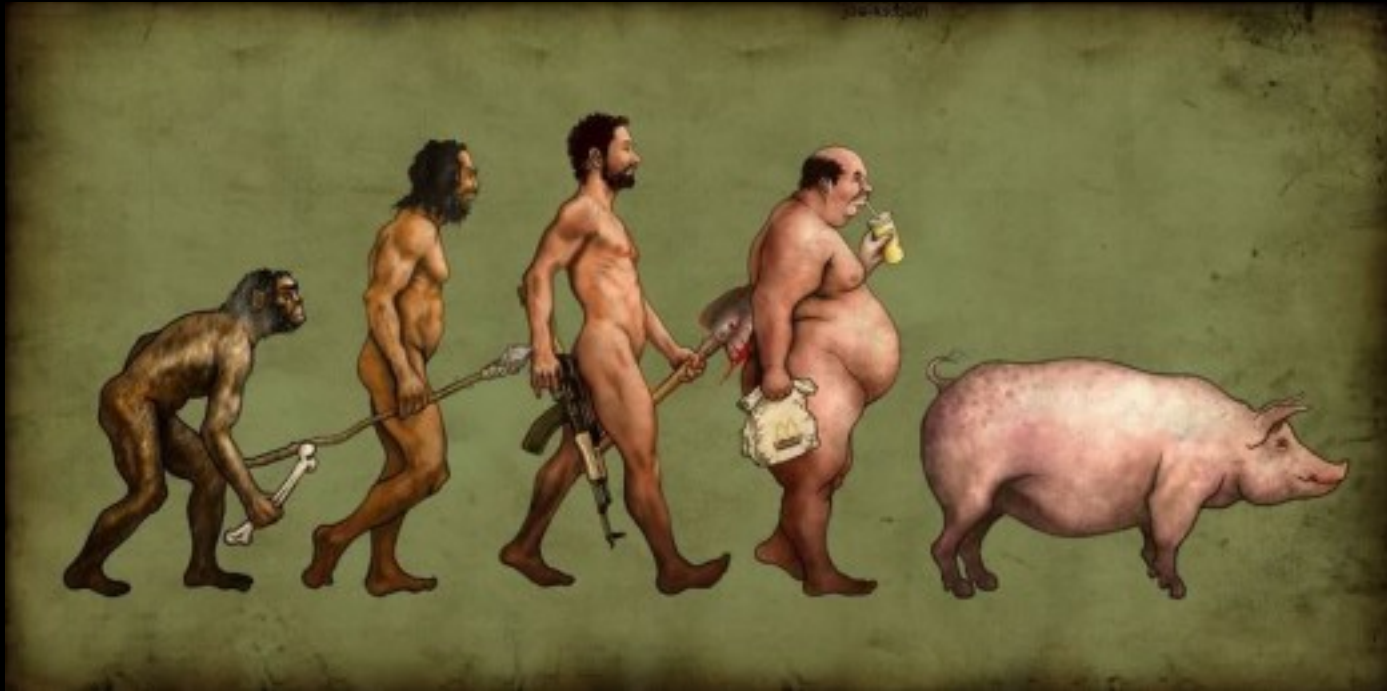
# Rebirth is fueled and directed by *karma*

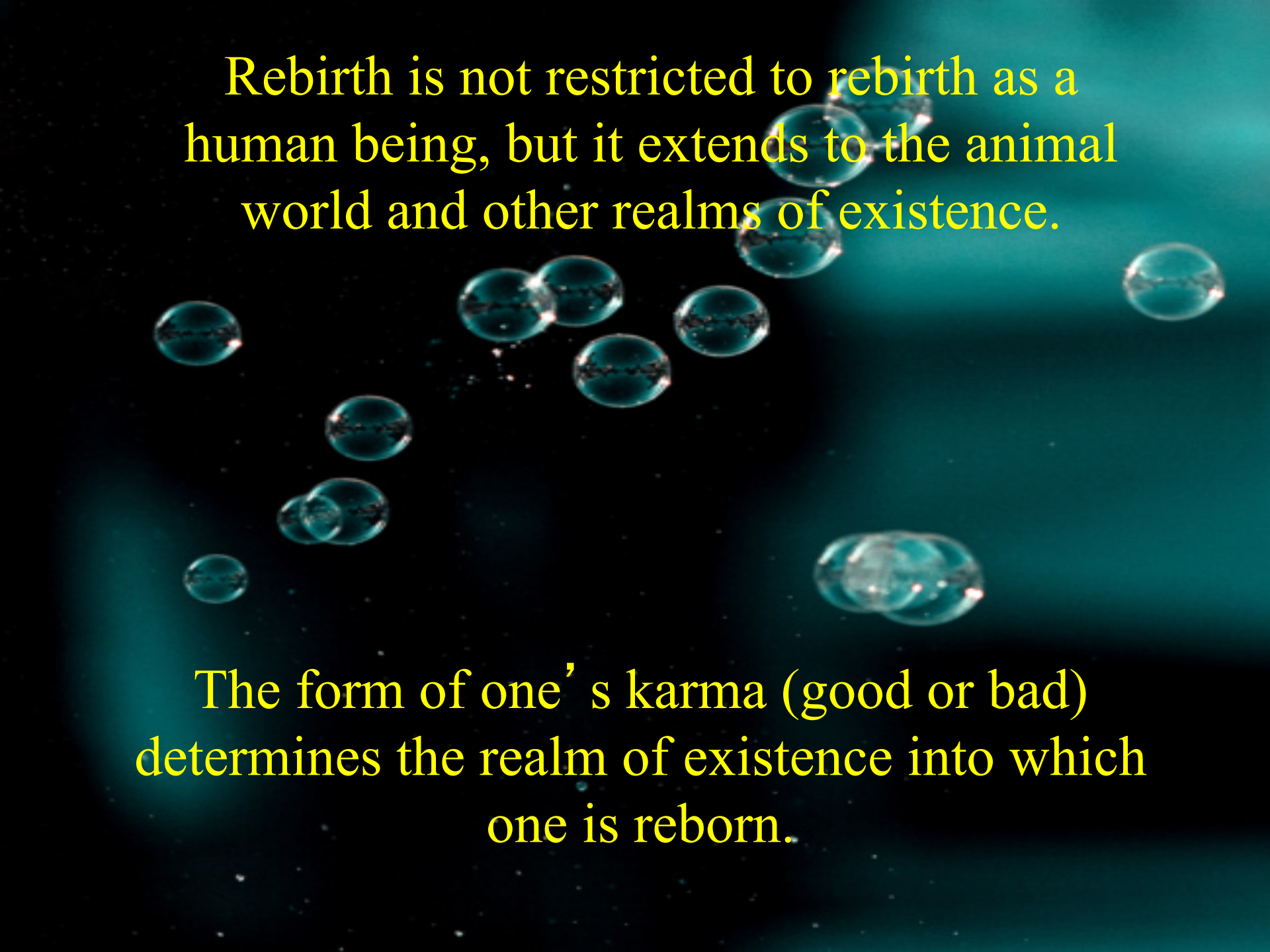
(sanskrit root *kri*, meaning “action”).

Broadly stated, *karma* is a law of cause and effect according to which actions in one lifetime influence actions in the next life.

Attachment to material forms of existence  
(modes of false ego) is the basic karmic energy  
that fuels samsara.

The *form* of one's karma is shaped by the  
specific nature of one's attachments.





Rebirth is not restricted to rebirth as a human being, but it extends to the animal world and other realms of existence.

The form of one's karma (good or bad) determines the realm of existence into which one is reborn.

Rebirth is not desirable.

It implies that a person is still trapped in ignorance about the nature of reality through various attachments to sense objects.

Suffering, associated with material existence, has not yet been transcended.

V. MOKSHA

*Moksha* is the state of release from  
*samsara*.

Attachments => False Ego => Karma => Samsara

What is required is a dismantling or dissolution of the false ego. Therefore, we must let go of our attachments to sense objects or material forms of existence.

# Destruction of the False Ego

Spiritual discipline  
dismantles the false ego:

*Spiritual Practice*

Consists in . . .

**Observing Moral Laws**

(aimed at renunciation of  
material attachments)

**and Meditation**



# Destruction of the False Ego

- Since the false ego is generated by attachments to sense objects, it is dissolved by *non-attachment* to sense objects.
- Attachment to sense objects creates a disturbance in consciousness. Meditation (*dhyana*) stills or quiets consciousness, allowing realization of Atman.
- Non-attachment and meditation operate in tandem. To concentrate the mind on one thing releases the attention given to other things. Hence, meditation assists non-attachment to sense objects.

# Meditation

Having heard and reflected on the word of Brahman in the scriptures, one must practice *concentration* on the truth of Brahman and the Self, repeating mantras such as *OM* (which signifies the cosmic power of Brahman) or *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman).



# Neti, Neti

- *The Upanishads* also teach that atman is realized by (i) identifying the temporary nature of the mind-body, which we mistake for the Self and (ii) thereby realizing that the “I” is distinct from the mind-body.
- This is called “neti, neti” meaning “not this, not that.”
- Through meditation, the subject realizes “I am not my thoughts; I am aware of my thoughts,” “I am not my feelings; I am aware of my feelings,” “I am not this sensation; I am aware of this sensation.” Thus, I am awareness, the witnessing background of all experience.

# **The Ultimate State (Moksha)**

**Spiritual practice leads to Moksha  
(liberation)**

**Moksha is freedom from samsara and thus  
freedom from suffering.**

**Moksha is absolute consciousness: “Brahman  
realization” and “Self realization” since the  
true nature of reality (Brahman) and the true  
self (Atman) is perceived.**

# Realization of Brahman and the Self

*Sat-Chit-Ananda*

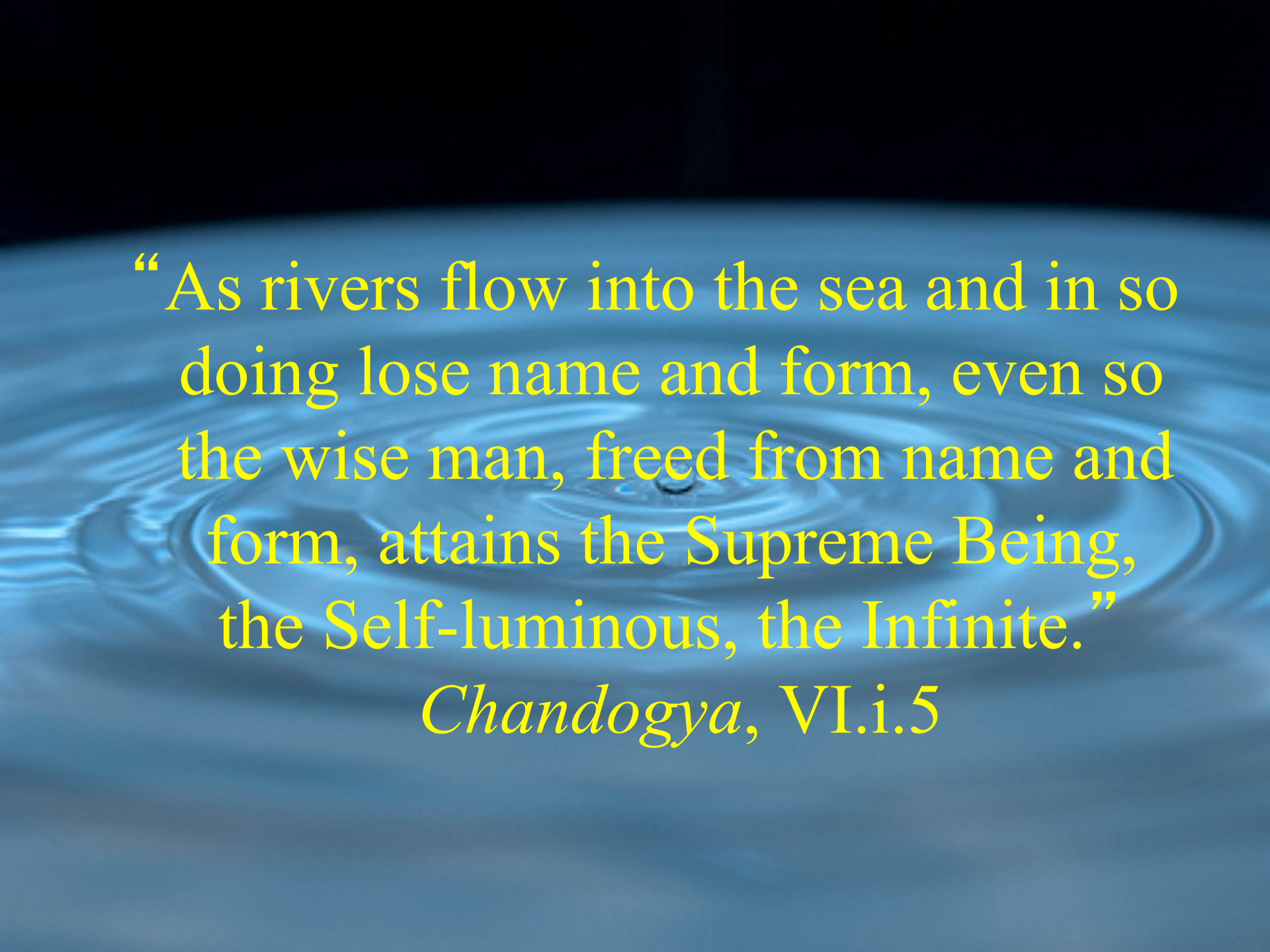
Being (Sat)

Consciousness (Chit)

Bliss (Ananda)

*Satchitananda* is also the name of  
Brahman.

So moksa is union with Brahman.



“As rivers flow into the sea and in so doing lose name and form, even so the wise man, freed from name and form, attains the Supreme Being, the Self-luminous, the Infinite.”

*Chandogya, VI.i.5*

# Six Primary Concepts in the *Upanishads*

Brahman

Atman

Avidya

Karma

Samsara

Moksha

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